

Genesis 37: 1-4; 12-28
Psalm 85
Matthew 14: 22-33

Rescued
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A prayer in the words of St Augustine, written about the year 400:

“Blessed are all thy Saints, O God and King, who have travelled over the tempestuous sea of this mortal life, and have made the harbor of peace and felicity. Watch over us who are still in our dangerous voyage; and remember such as lie exposed to the rough storms of trouble and temptations. Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide; but as in your mercy You have set our course, so steer the vessel of our life towards the everlasting shore of peace, and bring us at length to the quiet haven of our heart's desire, where You, O God, are blessed, and live and reign for ever and ever.”

“Frail is our vessel.” Today we heard two stories, one from the Hebrew Scriptures and one from the Gospels, about the ways humans are beset by frailty and fear. One is part of a longer story about the large and dysfunctional family of the patriarch Jacob (whose other name was Israel). The other is the story of the followers of Jesus in a boat, in a storm. One shows the arrogance, bitterness, rivalry and violence erupting between brothers. The other shows experiences of fear and awe leading to new insights. In one, the only rescue is the dubious compromise of selling a brother into slavery instead of murdering him. In the other, the disciple Peter is rescued from his own rash actions by the hand of Jesus, stretched over the waters.

The implication here is that people need rescuing, over and over again: rescue from their own failings; rescue from the anger of others; rescue from inanimate forces like weather or natural calamity. People need rescuing as individuals; communities need rescuing as well.

Since the days of the early Christians, a symbol for the church has been a boat. One source of this image is the ark of Noah, saving humanity from destruction. The other is the story of the disciples in a boat, beset by storms - a symbol of the church in a dangerous and threatening world bearing the faithful to salvation, with the presence of Jesus making survival possible.

In our Gospel story, turmoil was nothing new to Jesus or his followers. Shortly before the events of this story, they had received word that John the Baptist, their friend and former leader, had been executed. Jesus reacts with a need for quiet time and prayer, but he is followed by people needing attention. He turns to them and offers healing. Then he discovers that there is not enough to eat, and finds a way to feed, with the disciples help, the crowd of five thousand. Now he makes his getaway: he sends the disciples off in the boat – the text says that he compelled them to sail away – and he goes up the hillside to pray. But the turmoil continues.

The disciples in the boat probably only had a few miles to travel, but everything was against them. The text said that their boat was battered or even “tortured” by the waves. They were not close to the shore, and the wind was blowing hard in the wrong direction. It was dark, about 4 in the morning. Already exhausted by their ministry to the crowd and their grief, they were susceptible to

fear and delusions as well. And it is fear that takes the upper hand – the sighting of Jesus terrifies them. Not only the physical world, but the supernatural world is a place of chaos and threat. Their fear of the storm is nothing compared to their terror of the Holy One who comes to save them.

The sublime and reassuring words, “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid,” are followed by the strange and almost comical response of Peter: “Lord, if it **is** you, command me to come to you on the water.” Now, interpreters have had a great time with this. Some say this shows Peter’s courage and devotion – although this dissipates when he “notices” the strong wind (where has he been all night?) and he starts to sink. Other commentators say that Peter’s eagerness to get out of the boat is a bad thing: it shows that he was leaving his community and setting off on his own. This hubris leads to sinking and needing the grasp of Jesus’ hand. Jesus’ admonition, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” could really apply to either interpretation. Peter had little faith because he couldn’t follow through with his intentions; or Peter had little faith because he left the boat in the first place. In any case, he is rescued from sinking, the disciples are rescued from the storm, and insight is gained into the power of their teacher.

If we move forward 2000 years, and sit in this church, this little boat of God’s frail and wayward people, we might wonder how to assess our “rescue” needs. Certainly some people find here, in this community, solace for inner pain, purpose in a season of aimlessness, a sense of worth and wonder to bring into our weekday lives. And so we could sail along, buffeted at times from the “outside” but secure in the knowledge that we are safe here, where we can clearly hear echoes of those words, “Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.” In this model, the church exists for the needs and benefit of its members.

But, as we know from what precedes and follows that storm at sea in Galilee, the little boat of disciples was **not** sufficient unto itself. They did not follow Jesus for their own benefit. They did eventually all get out of the boat...if not in so dramatic a way as Peter. They found their true purpose by scattering into new places, and finding others who needed rescue even more. Yes, they gathered together, time and time again to worship and to learn. But their antennae of compassion were stretched farther and farther afield. As ours should be, even though it takes us into dangerous and challenging waters.

The Rev. Dr. James Moos serves as Co-Executive for Global Ministries and Executive Minister for Wider Church Ministries, our denomination’s “Board of Mission,” so to speak. His online article, written a week ago, speaks of those who are at risk, who need rescuing from the storms of life, those who are too young to bear responsibility for their troubles. He writes:

“... The latest round of violence in Palestine and Israel was initiated with the murder of three Israeli and one Palestinian youth. A 15-year-old American of Palestinian descent, Tariq Khdeir, was also brutally beaten by Israeli police in East Jerusalem. He asked that the world remember all of the children being victimized by violence: “They have names like mine. No child, whether they are Palestinian or Israeli, deserves to die that way.” Since Tariq made that statement, hundreds of Palestinian children have been killed by Israeli military action in Gaza.

Tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors are entering into the United States from Central America, fleeing violence and poverty. Gang violence, especially in Honduras and El Salvador, is driving much of the exodus from those countries. Teenagers are recruited for gangs; if they refuse, they and their families are threatened with retaliation. The entry into the United States of these

minors has reignited calls for tighter border security and expedited deportation proceedings, condemning untold thousands to poverty and violence.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is home to the world's deadliest conflict since World War II. In the past 25 years, more than 5.4 million Congolese have lost their lives. More than 50 percent of the lives lost are children under the age of 5. Rape is being used as an instrument of war, including the rape of children. The conflict is over the Congo's vast mineral wealth, including is the mineral coltan, which is used in electronic equipment. (This phenomenon is known as the "resource curse") Our cell phones could not function without coltan.

In 1989 the Convention of the Rights of the Child was adopted by the UN General Assembly and it was quickly and widely ratified. It sets standards for children's education, health care, penal codes and social services. The treaty has been adopted by all but three nations: Somalia, South Sudan and the United States."

Rev. Moos writes of disasters that are overwhelming in scope. How can we even begin to change them, or even to rescue a few of those victims? As St. Augustine might say, "Frail is our vessel, and the ocean is wide." But we do not sail alone. We do not face the waves and the wind alone. We "take heart" from the words and life of one who had endless compassion and endless courage. We are not afraid because we follow the one who emptied himself for the sake of others.

Our faith encourages us to explore the unpredictable and live with seeming paradox. We are utterly dependent on God's graceful saving grasp. We are wonderfully empowered at the same time. We live on that sea of beauty and terror. We are "still in our dangerous voyage" and we "remember such as lie exposed to the rough storms of trouble." We pray, with St. Augustine, for our own safe arrival at "the everlasting shore of peace," but we refuse to ignore those young and vulnerable people who need our hand stretched out in rescue. Amen.